

Testimony before the Public Health Committee
Monday February 26th, 2007
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**In Support of Passage of HB 5760:
An Act Concerning Prevention Strategies for Vision Problems in Young Children**

Chairman and members of the Public Health Committee, I am Dr. Craig Nielsen, an Optometrist practicing in the city of Meriden for going on twenty years.

Meriden is a city of 60,000 residents and has nearly 800 students who will be entering Kindergarten in the fall of 2007. Statically 2/3 or about 533 students arriving in September will have never had an eye examination. Of the 800 students 200 will have an eye or vision disorder that will impair or impact their ability to learn. These disorders will range from the relatively benign conditions requiring eyeglasses to the sight threatening conditions like amblyopia to in fact life threatening conditions such as retinoblastoma.

The current system of vision screenings done by pediatricians and school nurses completely misses the mark in the pre – school population. These screenings rely almost entirely on distance visual acuity to determine pass or fail criteria, but distance vision testing alone is not predictive of vision problems at near. Six years ago, my colleague, Dr. Brian Lynch said it best when he described the K – 4 years as the years spent “learning to read” while the rest of the school years were spent “reading to learn”. In fact there is no greater challenge facing the young student than learning to read and there is no greater predictor of a child’s success or failure in school than their reading ability.

The news on current screenings is not all bad. School screenings do pick up a large number of myopic or nearsighted children as they move into the 3rd and 4th grades. These students will have a hard time reading the board and screenings provide a valuable safety net to return these students back to their eye doctors for appropriate care. This bill in no way is designed to change or alter the current need for screenings in our schools. If enacted, relatively few nearsighted children will be found prior to entering Kindergarten and in fact even moderate amounts of nearsightedness will have little impact on reading skills. This bill is designed to allow the earlier detection of farsightedness, amblyopia, and ocular pathology. Conditions that are easily missed by screenings, conditions whose effect can be minimized by early detection and proper treatment.

In 2001, as President of the Connecticut Association of Optometrists, I spent many hours here at the Capitol fighting to pass very similar legislation raised by Senator Thomas Gaffey of Meriden. That legislation failed in the house and since that vote 1200 children

with vision disorders were sent to school and at least 400 were missed by screenings. These are children like my patient Ashley who in the 3rd grade was struggling to keep up with her class in reading, who was sent for testing and in fact treated for attention deficit disorder, whose mother thought it couldn't be vision related her child had been tested in her pediatrician's office and had passed all of her school screenings. Ashley was held back and repeated the 3rd grade. Her mothers concerns finally lead to a comprehensive eye examination that found Three diopters of astigmatism in each eye that caused significant blur at both distance and near viewing but Ashley learned at a young age that by simply squinting momentarily during screening she could read the letters and pass the test. Ashley was lucky, the intervention of glasses occurred soon enough and she has since become an avid reader, her glasses are worn constantly and there is no longer any concern about an attention deficit. She is currently ahead of her grade level in reading and doing very well. She of course suffered the largest penalty, having to repeat a grade. Failure in children at an early age can be devastating but she was able to overcome this. The State and City also pay a price in the cost of an extra year of education for this girl. Her classmates pay the price of the extra attention provider her needlessly by her teachers, time that was taken away from other students. This was just one student, in one town and it was one child too many.

Please support passage of **HB 5760: An Act Concerning Prevention Strategies for Vision Problems in Young Children.**

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Craig Nielsen, OD